

Work-based learning in a UK business school context: artefacts, contracts, learning and challenges

Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to highlight some of the issues involved in ensuring that final year undergraduate students have a meaningful work based learning experience as part of their business degree. It originated in discussions between the authors concerning varying attitudes towards the idea and practice of WBL in business schools. The study examines examples of artefacts produced for assessment, as well as perceptions of the practice of work based learning through an exploration of the perspectives and views of students and employers. Material was also gathered from the reflections of the authors in their capacity as WBL supervisors.

Design: This paper draws on a qualitative research study which used semi structured interviews to obtain views on a range of issues associated with work-based learning, including the nature and scope of what is learnt and acted upon in the workplace and the value of the learning contract. The data comprises semi structured interviews with 13 graduates of a post-1992 UK University and with 5 employers. The authors also reflect on their experience in delivering the WBL unit.

Findings: This study examines some key issues associated with work based learning. It supports the idea that unintended, informal and even ‘tacit’ knowledge may be effectively reflected upon and assessed; that learning contracts play an important role in work based learning arrangements and do not necessarily restrict or constrain what is learnt or how that learning is developed, and that artefacts provide the bridge between knowledge and work.

Research limitations / implications: Employer feedback was limited, and despite attempting to contact all WBL graduates, only 13 responded and were able to be interviewed. The findings will be helpful to different stakeholders engaged in WBL who wish to develop effective strategies to maximise the benefits of WBL. The findings of this research relate to different elements in the process including the value of the employer-led project and the evidence of real improvements / contributions made in delivering their artefact, of the learning contract as a ‘live’ document and the value of informal, experiential learning in the process.

Originality / value: The paper offers a contribution to our knowledge and understanding of perceptions of the actual practice of business students’ work based learning.

Key words: Work-based learning, artefacts, informal learning, learning contracts, challenges.

Paper Type: Research paper

Introduction

In this paper we examine the artefacts, contracts, challenges and learning associated with a final year 40 credit WBL unit offered by a UK Business School. This paper has its origins in a conversation which the authors had about some academic colleagues' attitudes to the idea of work-based learning (WBL). One focus of our discussion concerned difficulties when faced with the 'power shift' that can occur with students on placement who are working on the development of their WBL artefacts. Students may have more knowledge than their supervisors, especially in terms of the context of the learning and the output which is produced for and with the employer. Some colleagues allude to difficulties in terms of assessing the resulting artefact. In consequence of this, we wanted to highlight those issues that support a meaningful work-based learning experience for students (and, indeed, their supervisors). We set out to conduct a wide-ranging examination of perceptions of WBL from those most closely involved with it, and to explore one of its central ideas, the notion that 'learning is cradled in the task' (Revans, 1998, p.5).

Work-based learning is, as Harrison has noted, a 'problematic terrain' (2009, p.123). So many complex and diverse factors directly and indirectly shape such learning, including 'what counts in the workplace' (Garrick 1999, p. 226). Making 'what counts in the workplace' link directly with learning is a challenge and an opportunity for those who wish to promote work based learning university modules. Lester and Costley (2010) make the point that since the 1980s there has been an increasing engagement between higher education and work-based learning, and yet scepticism persists about the extent to which higher education institutions and the workplace can bridge theory and practice, and even the extent to which WBL may be considered a 'proper' and 'valid' form of learning sanctionable by academic institutions.

It has been argued that academic and industrial values cannot be judged by the same standards and that it is only with mutual respect that collaboration can yield positive results (Tasker and Peckham, 1994; Barnett, 2000; West, 2006). As the conversation alluded to above suggests, and as Nixon et al (2006) point out, from an academic perspective, work-based learning has been seen as a contested area, not least because it challenges a perception that universities are the primary repositories and conveyers of knowledge. Moreover, the scepticism is not new. Revans, the originator of action learning, a development approach rooted in the requirements of work-based practice, resigned his Chair at the University of Manchester in 1965 following negotiations over the new Manchester Business School, castigating the victory of the 'book' culture of Owens College over the 'tool' culture of the then Manchester College of Technology, later UMIST (Revans, 1980, p. 197). He abhorred this apparent disconnect between the 'book' and the 'tool' culture viewing it as having the potential to fracture society. He argued for a closer engagement between academy and society as a necessary corrective. The idea of students not only becoming learners *at* work but learners *through* work has an attractive resonance, especially taken from a Business School vantage point.

This paper suggests that work-based learning has a genuine role in acting as a 'knowledge catalyst' rather than simply 'knowledge provider' (Costley and Armsby, 2007, p. 24). Indeed there is evidence to suggest that we can go further than this; that it can enable partnerships which deliver *actionable knowledge* in the workplace, which is to say knowledge that is implementable in context (Antonacopolou, 2009). Despite the scepticism alluded to above, as Pedler and Trehan (2010) have pointed out, a growing body of researchers argue that the active involvement of practitioners and stakeholders beyond the confines of the academic

community is fundamental to the generation of such useful, actionable knowledge in the workplace (Antonacopolou 2009; Ram and Trehan 2010).

We concur with Raelin's (2008) perspective on work-based learning as that which is derived from action. He argues that work-based learning can be distinguished from traditional classroom learning in a number of important ways. Firstly, work-based learning is centred around reflection on work practices; it is not just a question of developing a set of technical skills and competences. It is concerned with reviewing, reflecting and learning from experience. Secondly, work-based learning views learning as arising from action and problem solving within a working environment, and thus is centred on 'live' projects and genuine challenges to individuals and organisations – such projects should matter. Work-based learning also sees the creation of knowledge as a shared and collective activity, one in which people discuss ideas, and share problems and solutions. Finally, work-based learning requires not only the acquisition of new knowledge but the acquisition of 'meta-cognition' – which involves thinking about one's problem solving processes and 'the re-framing necessary to create new knowledge' (2008, p. 3).

An aim of the study described in this article is to illuminate views on the nature and practice of work based learning from both employer and student perspectives in concert with our reflections as WBL supervisors. This paper is organised in the following way. First, we offer some background and context to the study. Then, we focus on the following key areas: what is learnt, and how is this learning developed in work-based learning, including the development of the artefact; how the learning contract adds value; and, finally, some reflections on the challenges of enacting WBL. The study focused on considering the value of the learning contract and the scope of the artefact produced as these elements of assessment are possibly unique to a WBL unit.

Background to the Study

The context for this study is a 40 credit final year WBL unit which is one of three 40 credit final year options, the others being the Dissertation and the Business Research Report. It is available to students from a range of business degrees (from general business and management to single discipline specialist degrees such as human resource management or marketing), who have completed an internship of at least 9 months. The overall aim of the unit is to provide a framework for structured applied learning to take place within an organisation. The unit has, therefore, no pre-set subject based criteria. Rather assessment is made from the application of a set of Level 6 generic criteria and the artefact as agreed in the Learning Contract. There are three parts to the assessment process: a learning contract which identifies the kind of output to be produced for the organisation and the milestones along the way to achieving it. The specific learning to be achieved is not prescribed, and students are encouraged to record changes to the learning contract as the work progresses. There are no formal, taught lectures or seminars.

The second is the 'artefact' itself, together with a reflection on the learning gained from producing the artefact. The artefact is a substantial piece of work which the employer determines. Previous examples of such artefacts have included training products, media events, strategies, policies and service developments of various kinds. Finally, the student produces an academic commentary, which brings together academic and theoretical explanations and the practicalities of producing the specific artefact for the organisation in question.

Artefacts and Contracts

The production of a work based artefact provides a focus for the learner, and a tangible output for the organisation. Such artefacts have long been recognised as having potential for demonstrating skills and competences (eg Lyons and Bement, 2001, p.176). This notwithstanding there is comparatively little detailed research on work-based learning artefacts with some notable exceptions (Nottingham and Akinleye, 2014). Specific recent examples of students' work based artefacts from the unit include:

- A report on communications at a large multinational organisation followed by the development of an internal communications strategy. This was so well received by the UK company that the student was invited to a European country to present the findings and help them in the development of their Communications Strategy
- Use of Germany's DAX list and the Fortune 100 (America) companies to analyse usage of a particular product and develop sophisticated market intelligence to support a more focused marketing effort for a large multinational.
- An event for World Diabetes Day for a major company which included: a charity walk; themed refreshments; on-site spa; a building 'light-up'.
- Developed and managed a large employee engagement survey for a national organisation employing more than 2000 people. This included: liaison with external providers to agree the questions to ask; the selection and training of Employee Champions to be the focus of action across the business, which included the development of a briefing pack; the production of publicity posters and table top fliers; the development of an internal web page with FAQs accessible to all staff
- A feasibility study into the development of a strong Employer Brand for a large organisation which had a strong product brand but little in the way of a presence in the employment market in the UK and no identifiable 'Employer Brand'. This study was presented to the European Directors together with a vision of rolling-out the report across Europe.
- The development of a robust appraisal and analysis of suppliers for a manufacturing company to use for the re-appraisal of their supply chain to control costs and ensure JIT availability of parts for the production line.
- A report on assessing value for money in relation to an insurance contract for a state school.

This work is 'signed off' by the organisation and then submitted for assessment by the academic supervisor. A short accompanying reflective piece outlines what the student has produced and how they have gone about producing it, what they have learnt from undertaking the work and what they might do differently next time. We concur with Nottingham and Akinleye (2014) who have written in relation to the introduction of what they term 'professional artefacts' into their Arts Work Based Programme of the 'limitation of text-based explanations alone' for reporting on work based learning work. They argue that the professional artefact is not just a practical element that illustrates knowledge but 'a way to exhibit an understanding of the relationship between knowledge and work-based activities' (2014, p.99).

Learning contracts also have an important place in most work-based learning arrangements. Nixon et al (2006) analyse a number of institutional case studies involved in work based learning, including and make the point that a distinctive feature of effective work based learning is that learning outcomes are identified and agreed between student, HEI and employer. They suggest that the focus of the agreement will depend on the relative predominance of the needs and interests of the student, employer and provider. This, they

argue, is rooted in a 'tripartite approach' comprising the student's own life plan (including their own skills and aspirations), the corporate plan of the provider (including questions of curriculum offer and access) and the business plan of the employer. This principally involves the development of a learning contract in which learning outcomes are clearly laid out.

However, as Gibbs (2009) has pointed out, the literature on learning contracts is in a confused state, not least because terms such as 'learning contract' and 'learning agreement' are quite often used interchangeably, and 'learning contract' has legal overtones which may be judged incompatible with 'autonomous, emancipatory learning' (2009, p.33). In the context of this research, 'learning contract' has been used in the sense of an 'understanding' rather than a binding agreement, which sets out the objectives of the project, the learning and skills required to undertake it and the kind of evidence that will be supplied to evaluate the learning and the quality of the contract.

In the unit which is the subject of this article, students are expected to submit a proposal before the learning contract is formulated. Time is spent at this early stage making sure that the artefact is substantial enough for a 40 credit unit. Sometimes students conflate objectives with output, and so it is at this early stage that tutors can ensure that both employer and student are clear about what exactly will be submitted for examination.

Learning through WBL

Whilst some literature suggests that actionable knowledge is that which is useful both to the academy and industry (Coghlan, 2006; Sexton & Ling-Wu, 2009) it can be seen as primarily implementable by those most concerned with it. Blood (2006) for example has suggested that for knowledge to be 'actionable' it must go beyond being knowledge for its own sake and must lead to behaviour change in the form of choice (guiding decisions) or implementation (guiding action).

Work-based learning is uniquely placed to develop both declarative (propositional) knowledge and procedural knowledge, which is to say that knowledge that is concerned with how to perform – 'know-how' - in the work environment. Key questions concern how to improve learning processes in relation to work settings and how an individual learns in and through work.

Respondents to this study were able to articulate the development of their understanding through informal learning in the workplace, and in that context two particular approaches to informal learning may be regarded as being especially relevant; the contribution of the Deweyan (1916) philosophy of pragmatism, and Polanyi's (1966) concept of tacit knowledge. Deweyan pragmatism teaches us to attend to the difference our actions and our learning make to actual practice. Pragmatism is very much a philosophy of praxis; in essence, and simplistically, beliefs are true only if they work. Pragmatism is concerned with the outcomes and consequences of action, and in answering the question: what practical difference will our actions make? Deweyan pragmatism sits well with a work based learning which is rooted in action in the workplace. Polanyi's famous dictum 'we know more than we can tell' (1966, p.4) means not only that we have knowledge that we cannot easily articulate, but also that we have knowledge of which we may not even be consciously aware. Bruner (1996) speaks of the error we make if we locate knowledge in 'a single head' (1996, p. 154). One of the questions considered in this study is the extent to which the workplace can help the student undertaking a work based learning project to benefit from, and begin to develop, 'tacit knowing', and to what extent new, actionable knowledge is generated in the process.

Learning does not always have to take place in a structured, formal and linear manner (Yeo, 2008). Marsick and Watkins found that of all employee learning, only 20% learn from structured training programmes – most learning occurs ‘on the job’ (Marsick and Watkins, 1990). As Yeo (2008) points out, it is striking that 80% of employee learning appears to come about through informal means. Employers can deliberately encourage and provide informal and experiential learning opportunities, not only for employees but also for placement students, and the work-based learning programme on which this article is based is deliberately designed to assist that process, alongside other structured opportunities within the University. Yeo (2008) also cites Stonyer and Marshall’s (2002) study which showed that learning in workplace contexts is driven largely by a community of practice through peer learning and sharing, and by providing mentoring opportunities for peers to help ‘apprenticed novices’ to move toward ‘practising expert’ status (*pace* Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Central to our conception of work-based learning in the business school context is the value of seeing the difference that knowledge makes to practice. As Costley and Armsby (2007) have pointed out, the need to assess the accumulation of facts and knowledge may still be a requirement, but ‘more important is to be able to identify what particular facts and knowledge are required in any given ‘real world’ situation, knowing what the problem is as well as solving it...’ (2007, p. 24).

In assessing the impact of WBL, it is important to ask how knowledge and skill gained is used, and also how the experience of ‘doing the thing’ might lead the student, upon reflection, to act differently in the future. As Trehan and Pedler have observed, the emphasis on practice offers up ‘a basis for connecting different modes of knowledge – technical, scientific, practical...as a foundation for co-creating actionable knowledge’ (2010, p.237).

Method: Data and participants

The study used primary qualitative data derived from semi structured interviews with graduates who had undertaken a 40 credit work based learning project on placement as part of their final year and with employers who had hosted work based learning students on placement. Normal internal processes for ethical approval were followed, we did not want to approach current students in case they felt pressure to say what they might think we as interviewers wanted to hear, we therefore adopted a purposeful sampling approach. Graduate interviewees who had undertaken the WBL unit held placements in a wide variety of settings, including financial services, the automotive industry, manufacturing, the ministry of defence, air navigation services, software education services and the retail sector. All employers of those students opting for the WBL unit were invited to participate. 13 graduates agreed to be interviewed for this study and 5 employers were also interviewed about their experience in hosting and managing work based learning students. Employers in this study represented diverse types of organisation including a public sector organisation, a multi-national telecommunications company, a security systems company, a manufacturing company and a multinational information technology company.

We wanted to understand how WBL is *perceived* by employers and graduates. Semi structured interviews were chosen as our method as they have been aptly described as ‘the construction site of knowledge’ (Kvale, 1996, p.42) and they offered the opportunity for us to access differing perceptions and perspectives on WBL. Respondents were asked a range of questions including about the WBL artefact they produced, their decision to undertake WBL, the nature and type of learning that occurred (including ‘tacit’ and ‘informal’ learning) the extent to which theory and practice is or is not bridged by WBL, the qualities of an effective WBL supervisor, and their perspectives on the impact of WBL. Employers were asked,

among other things, their reasons for hosting placement students and for supporting work-based learning projects, their assessment of the impact of such projects, and the nature of the learning students gain from the experience. Our questions grew out of our engagement with the literature on work-based learning.

Findings and Discussion

Students reported that they felt that they had become ‘experts’ in relation to their particular projects and came to feel they knew more than their supervisors about the specifics of their project and the resulting artefact. Focusing on delivering a tangible and practical artefact for the organisation and the unit was considered especially important by the students who had the opportunity to see the contribution their WBL made to practice within the organisation. For example:

The project was uniquely mine. Initially it was a project for my manager and was to be presented to him. As it developed my manager was confident in what I produced and it was decided that it should be presented to the Directors (M)

A recurrent theme in interviews was the development of ‘soft skills’. A number of graduates reported the development of their ability to network, to influence others, to present more effectively and to build business relationships. As one interviewee put it:

I did a lot of networking, learned how organisations work, coaching, soft skills, communication. You cannot learn to network by reading a book (I)

Not all of the learning gained was of this kind. Some was very specifically related to the project itself. For example one interviewee spoke about the transferability of the knowledge he had built up in relation to the enterprise software industry which he felt he could now ‘take anywhere’. Employers also spoke about the development of soft skills. One commented on the ‘basic’ nature of some of the skills acquired:

They are dropped from the ‘bubble’ of university into corporate life. Social skills are really key, and learning about the etiquette of being in the workplace. It is quite a culture shock for some of them (Multinational Telecommunications Company).

As we have observed, a number of commentators have described the centrality and importance of the learning contract (LC) to the success of a work based learning programme (Stephenson and Yorke, 2008; Garnett, 1998; Costley, 2011). As Costley (2011) has observed:

The focused and strategic development of learning agreements can act as a real attempt to bring the two worlds together to integrate and facilitate the learning experience (2011, p.399).

We asked interviewees about the helpfulness or otherwise of the learning contract and about the nature of changes made to the contract over time. It became apparent that most respondents did view the learning contract as a ‘live’ document which had a key role in focusing the student and providing a sense of direction. It also meant, as one of our respondents themselves observed, that all parties (student, company and supervisor) knew what was happening and what the resulting work based learning artefact should actually look like.

...(the learning contract was) important in providing the context, good direction and milestones...I did not have many small changes, but the project grew, it became much bigger (M).

Only one of the 13 graduate interviewees was explicit in stating that the learning contract has not been of value:

I don't believe the LC helped me in particular...I did not use it at all, but did make a change from the original (Ma)

Importantly, it was a requirement that the learning contract had to be added to where changes occurred which might impact delivery or the scope of the project.

I made 9 additions over time to the LC and I could have made more. It was helpful initially because my boss could see the work I was putting in and could see an outline of what needed to be done on paper...my problem was that quite a lot of changes happened and documenting all those changes, well I don't want to use the word 'tedious' but it was needed as even some of the little changes could have huge impact on the project. But when I met with the boss I could come prepared with what was expected of me (O).

The learning contract set up for this programme could be viewed as comparable to the organisational personal development plan which sets out work objectives and the learning and development actions required to help meet these objectives. Employers offer structured and unstructured learning opportunities to help meet some of these goals. For example students attend in-house workshops, are often assigned organisational mentors and may even complete other relevant work-related qualifications whilst they are on placement.

Most respondents reported that WBL was 'more in keeping' with the nature of their degree, and both employers and students liked the fact that it was rooted in 'real work' and delivered something for the business. The evidence from this study suggests that more needs to be done to maintain a shared understanding of the particular focus of the work project, though the employers we spoke to understood that the project had to have a clear academic, as well as a work focus. None betrayed any awareness of the apparently 'contested' nature of the approach. Indeed a number of respondents saw WBL as a challenging and stretching option, potentially even more stretching than the standard dissertation option:

I think it does have advantages over the dissertation – I think it is academic but it takes it a level up (G).

We asked a number of questions around what was learnt and how it was learnt. It emerged that quite a lot of the learning and knowledge acquired was of the informal, unanticipated and, arguably, 'tacit' variety. As Armstrong and Mahmud (2008) have observed in relation to their study of *managerial* tacit knowledge, this kind of knowledge is closely associated with experts and with successful people – and it is elusive in character and difficult to measure. Yet the capacity to develop this kind of knowledge base is immensely important to both individuals and organisations. For example, one respondent spoke at length about the business of learning to manage other people:

I was asked to manage teams across the world and had to learn to manage all the different personalities. For example, I had a problem with a member of the team who could be a bit abrasive and I had to give him feedback. So you learn to deal with a lot of process work – keeping relationships working properly (G).

The extent to which 'tacit' and informal and also unanticipated knowledge was (or was not) gained and recognised within the unit (through assessment) was of interest to us as we believed it to be important, perhaps even materially contributing to graduate employability. A wide variety of this kind of 'informal' and 'tacit' knowledge and skill was reported by the

graduates, who often did not recognise it as being significant until they reflected on it later as part of a written reflective accompaniment to the submitted artefact, and later on production of the academic commentary. For example:

I had a huge growth in confidence and self-belief. I had high profile exposure and I was surprised to learn that HR is sometimes seen as 'the enemy'. I had to learn to handle that and get 'buy-in' (S)

Interviewees were in broad agreement as to the essential qualities of the WBL supervisor, which echoed the points made by Saxton and Stephenson (2005) and also builds upon them, as the following suggests:

My supervisor invested a lot of time in listening to me...he really listened and understood the business, my role and the project (G)

Much more emphasis was placed by students on being listened to and encouraged to adopt a questioning attitude than it was on 'telling' the student what he or she should do in relation to their project. A shift occurred over time as the student gradually began to realise that they were acquiring expertise in relation not only to the development of the project but also in relation to understanding the particular context in which the project was set. They came to require different things from the supervisor, and a particular emphasis was increasingly placed on the supervisor as an accessible 'sounding board'.

An interesting finding is that some of the reasons given by employers for supporting work-based learning were directly linked to business or service need. This underscores the value of the employer-led project, rather than a project identified by the student alone. Students come to recognise that the job – or the project in this case – becomes the curriculum. Employers recognise this, and capitalise upon it. For example the quote below comes from an employer who hosted three WBL students in consecutive years:

In the past few years the organisation has gone through significant changes and the WBL has assisted in meeting some of the needs that have arisen from these changes (School)

Where a project is employer led, the employer is likely to be more committed to it and have a clear, vested interest in its success.

For the business this was a project that needed to be done but perhaps resource has not allowed for (sic) (Manufacturing Company).

This links with the organisation's views regarding the impact of the project. For example:

The work X performed contributed to the company meeting the government legislation deadline for implementation of the project, it also helped us understand how the project affected the workplace externally and whether there would be any impact on the way contractors were engaged (Security Systems Company).

As Costley and Armsby (2007) have pointed out, an inappropriate assessment process which neglects or minimises the kind of knowledge gained from the work itself can undermine and debase the quality of learning. For a work based learning programme to be successful there needs to be a recognition of the need for critical reflection and an acknowledgement of the

very great value of acquiring tacit and unintended learning (as indicated above). We asked interviewees about the extent to which WBL acted as a bridge between the academy and industry, between the experience based knowledge of learners and practitioners and the propositional knowledge of academics.

At (this company) we do not treat our students any differently from our full time staff, we want them to be ready for the real world, they have real tasks, projects and a lot of real responsibility. I think that the WBL emphasises to future employers that the candidate is ready to hit the ground running rather than having to spend months training them up (Manufacturing Company).

Those employers we interviewed saw links between the WBL project and employability, and one employer spoke in terms of the student leaving a positive ‘legacy’ for the organisation:

As a practical piece of work that they take ownership of it injects a bit of pride into the work. I talk a lot with them about what legacy will they leave behind in the organisation which I find helps with commitment to complete to a high standard (State School).

Much of the discussion on evaluating the impact of such initiatives as WBL centres on deploying scientific or instrumental measures but it is questionable whether these measures are wholly helpful in this context – some of the learning gains are intangible, informal and ‘tacit’ and are not readily susceptible to rational-scientific assessment mechanisms. Students engage in critical reflection and thus begin the difficult yet necessary process of learning to become thoughtful practitioners.

In addition to garnering the perspectives of students and employers, we also discussed our own reflections as to the challenges involved in delivering WBL. Amongst these challenges is working with colleagues who are not, perhaps, wholly in sympathy with WBL as a concept, and who may even have deep-rooted pedagogic concerns. Because WBL transfers power to the learners this creates asymmetries of power in the tutor / student relationship which can prove difficult to negotiate (Talbot & Lilley, 2014). Historically, the WBL unit, although equivalent in terms of credits to the dissertation option, might have been seen by some as ‘thin gruel’ compared to the organisational research needed for the ‘dissertation proper’. Our view of this has always been a robust defence of an approach which finds ‘learning cradled in the very task itself’ (Revans, 1998, p.5).

We acknowledge that part of this issue might be an understandable concern as to how to assess the artefact, which is an unknown quantity at the start of the programme and is subject to change and development as the student works on it and develops it. We have found both initial proposal and the learning contract invaluable tools here. But in the case of the learning contract only if it is taken by all involved as a ‘living’ document used to set out objectives at the start and to chart changes and movement in how the project / artefact progresses as time goes on. The project leading to the production of the artefact is specifically determined by the employer, not the student or the supervisor. So the ‘curriculum’ is led by the requirements of the organisation. Supervisors have to begin to see themselves, therefore, less as subject experts, and more as facilitators of learning. This may account for some student respondents placing value on those supervisors who actively listen to their supervisees.

This paper set out to explore some of the perceptions students, employers and the authors as WBL supervisors had in relation to work based learning. Work based learning offers opportunities for universities to work in partnership with the student and industry, and to legitimise employer-led projects as effective vehicles for learning and growth. We can then look forward to becoming co-creators of actionable knowledge, and to reconciling the apparent disconnect between ‘tool’ and ‘book’. The WBL unit which is the subject of this research has developed, and it is now offered as an option on ten courses with students selecting this as an option, undertaking their internship not just in the UK but also in the US, the Philippines, Singapore and other European countries. The small sample size, and the qualitative nature of the study, mean that these findings are not susceptible to generalization, nor can any large claims be made. We suggest that further research incorporating a larger scale sample would be fruitful. A wider, collaborative project with a number of universities actively engaged in work based learning might enable us to examine more closely the conditions for more effective and impactful work based learning.

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